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Mordachai Vanunu's Meaning for the Nuclear Age

Mordechai Vanunu is the preeminent hero of the nuclear era. He is the one who consciously risked all he had in life to warn his own country and the world of an existing, ongoing addition to the nuclear dangers of the era. And he is the one who has actually paid that price, a burden in many ways worse than death, for his heroic and prophetic act, for doing exactly what he should have done and what others should be doing. He is a prophet who deserves honor in all the world.

The secret he revealed was that his country-like our own, and Russia, and several other nuclear weapons states-had a nuclear program and stockpile that went far beyond any supposed needs of nuclear deterrence. Its scale and nature was clearly designed for threatening and if necessary launching first-use of nuclear weapons against conventional forces-Israeli attacks comprising hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons.

In this, Israel was imitating and endorsing the legitimacy of US and NATO first-use threats, which in turn required and rationalized a nuclear-arms buildup that mocked the pretensions and supposed commitments the US and the Soviet Union signed in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It endorsed the US concept of an indefinitely structured two-tier division of the world into Nuclear States and Non-Nuclear-Weapons States, in which Israel, with US acquiescence, would be in the first category, the first in the Middle East.

First but not last. The US-Israeli policy, joined by the Soviet Union, Britain, and France (China has at least announced a no-first-use policy), made virtually certain that India, and shortly Pakistan, would choose to join that first tier, and that other states in the region-not only Iraq-would seek and eventually acquire these weapons. That prospect-dooming any prospect of non-proliferation, let alone abolition-made the Israeli policy of the utmost danger to Israel itself in the longer run.

Twice in the last thirteen years there was reason to fear that the worst possible consequences of the US and Israeli policies might shortly be realized. Either or both Israeli and US tactical nuclear weapons could very plausibly have been launched against Iraq, if either in the Gulf War in 1991 or the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 had led Saddam Hussein to launch short-range missiles armed with chemical warheads against Israel or against US troops. Both countries had warned that such an act-which seemed highly likely to follow, or even shortly precede, an American ground assault-would lead to the "annihilation" of Iraq, the "destruction" of its society. These were clearly nuclear threats

of the use of nuclear weapons: which President George W. Bush has very accurately described to the UN as "weapons of mass murder." I do not believe, under either Bush or from Israel, that these threats of mass murders were bluffs, nor meant solely for purposes of deterrence.

In 1991 Saddam Hussein was known to possess weapons of mass murder: nerve gas warheads and biological weapons. In 2002-03 he was believed by the US Administration, incorrectly, still to do so. In both cases the Administration gambled that he could be deterred from launching them by threat of nuclear retaliation, though this was far from certain, above all in the event of ground invasion of Iraq. In pressing that invasion, George W. Bush, even more than his father, was willing to accept the risk that Saddam Hussein, whom both considered a "madman," possessed and would use enough WMD's to trigger a US or Israeli nuclear response: the first precedent for nuclear first-use since Nagasaki. It may be that the sole reason he won this gamble was that his estimate of Iraq's capability and deployment turned out to be wholly mistaken.

The very existence of the hundreds of Israeli weapons of which Mordechai Vanunu warned is not to this day officially admitted by Israel to the world. Still less is the Israeli stockpile opened for inspection and monitoring, any more than those of any of the other declared or undeclared nuclear weapons states, including, very dangerously, those of Pakistan and India. .

In a nuclear-armed Middle East, no amount of military strength could protect Israeli cities from the possibility of utter annihilation, not just in a crisis or war but at any moment of any day. No country in the world has a stronger stake in preventing proliferation, above all in the Middle East. Yet just like every other nuclear weapons state, Israel's secret nuclear policies actually promote rather than block proliferation. Like all the others but to an extreme degree, Israel's policies and underlying attitudes are dangerously shortsighted and self-destructive.

This is unlikely to change without public mobilization and pressure. That demands public awareness and discussion, which practices of secrecy, deception and ambiguity in every one of these countries, not only Israel, have been designed to thwart. Not in one single case has the decision to become a nuclear weapons state been taken democratically, and to this day there has never been an adequately informed public discussion of nuclear weapons policy in any of these states.

For example it is likely that in such a discussion not one of these states--not Israel, not the US, not Russia, Britain, France or China--could convince its own people or the rest of the world that it had a valid, legitimate reason for possessing as many warheads as the several hundred that Israel apparently has, let alone the larger number that each of them has actually acquired (except, so far, India and Pakistan). Of course, this applies most of all to the thousands of warheads that the US and Russia currently propose to maintain indefinitely, in direct violation of their international obligations and declarations. Still less could they justify their secret targeting plans for these warheads if secrecy did not protect both these plans and their own estimates of the catastrophic human consequences of carrying them out.

No other national policy in Israel (as in the other nuclear weapon states) so deserved searching and sober national debate and concern; which could not occur under the Israeli government's policy of censorship, secrecy, and misleading and false denial. Mordacai Vanunu's revelations were indispensable to promoting this type of debate but they were obviously insufficient to forcing it without further disclosures. That debate has not yet occurred; in this way, Vanunu's hopes were not fulfilled. In the short run, his efforts failed. But that doesn't make his effort less heroic or appropriate. And I know from my own experience, that initial indications of ineffectiveness and failure, even over a period of years, can be misleading and premature. There is simply no way to know what the hidden, indirect-in his case global-ongoing consequences of such an act of truth-telling may be, nor to put a limit on the possible eventual benefits of it.

More Vanunu's are urgently needed. That is true not only in Israel but in every nuclear weapons state, declared and undeclared, and for that matter in many "virtual" nuclear weapons states, industrialized nations with high technology and stocks of fissile material like Japan and Germany. Can anyone fail to recognize the value to the security of the world and to stopping proliferation of a Pakistani, Indian, Iraqi, Iranian or North Korean "Vanunu" making comparable revelations on the nature and scale of his or her country's clandestine weapons program?

But the need for such secret-telling is not limited to citizens of what nuclear weapons states presumptuously call "rogue" nations. Every nuclear weapons state has secret policies, aims, programs and plans that contradict its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the 1995 Declaration of Principles agreed to at the NPT Renewal Conference, and which threaten its own security and that of humanity. Every official and scientist with knowledge of these violations could and should do what Mordacai Vanunu did when that is the only way to make the situation known, to change it.

That is what I should have done in the early Sixties on the basis of my knowledge of the secret nuclear planning and practices of the United States. Explicit treaties violated by these continuing programs did not then yet exist, but their extreme danger both to US security and to human survival were apparent enough to me. I now feel derelict for wrongfully keeping them secret, but I did not then have Vanunu's example to guide me.

Vanunu should long since have been released from solitary and from prison not because he had "suffered enough" but because what he did was right for him to do under the circumstances. It needed to be done, and he deserves appreciation and gratitude for having the courage to do it in the face of the foreseeable efforts to silence and punish him by those who wish, foolishly and culpably, to preserve disastrously reckless nuclear programs in Israel as elsewhere. The cult and culture of secrecy in every nuclear weapons state has endangered and continues to threaten the survival of humanity. Vanunu's challenge to that wrongful and dangerous secrecy must be joined worldwide.